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## Martyrs, athletes, and transmedia storytelling in late antiquity

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# Praxis

## Martyrs, athletes, and transmedia storytelling in late antiquity

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[0.1] Abstract—Fan fiction in antiquity suffers from a lack of certainty regarding what is canon. Is what is now considered fan fiction really fan fiction, or is it another contemporary version of the canon? The concept of fan fiction thus ought to be combined with the idea of transmedia storytelling, building on snowball-effect stories. This approach is used in an analysis of how saints became a characteristic of late antiquity Christianity. This era used fan fiction-like texts to describe the saints' life stories. The shrines and dedicated basilicas allowed distinct communities to gather and celebrate, and pilgrimages combined adventure and biographical identification with pictures, relics, and pilgrim tokens for the beloved saint. The Christian world in late antiquity has characteristics reminiscent of the universes created by transmedia storytelling, the aim of which is complete immersion in content.

[0.2] Keywords—Athletes of Christ; Cult of the saints; Fan fiction; Patronage; Pilgrimage

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### 1. Were there canons in late antiquity?

[1.1] One particular word, *canon*, links fan fiction with the Bible and suggests grounds for comparison. However, interestingly, the use of the term troubles both biblical studies and adjacent fields and scholarship on fan fiction. Before I address these analytical issues, I would like to briefly contrast the usage of the term and its implications in fan fiction communities as well as late antiquity.

[1.2] In fan fiction communities, the term *canon* relates to the original source to which a fan story relates by using its characters, universes, plot, specific language, and so on. This notion of canon as an authoritative predecessor of a work that—either officially or unofficially—relies on it is a rather recent one. The notion requires stable forms of a medium that can be protected and owned by individuals (copyrighted). By contrast, in late antiquity books were expensive, and people often copied only relevant passages onto cheaper and less bulky tablets. Moreover, the process of copying, whether it concerned the whole book or only parts of it, further affected the original content. Late antique authors cared to attach their name to their literary productions as well, yet there were no laws that would have supported their ownership claims.

[1.3] The late antique usage of the term canon, then, had nothing to do with originality or ownership. Rather, the canon was a list of ecclesiastically authenticated books. Works could qualify as "canonizable" if they were true in style and theology to other works already

considered to be canonical (Pentiuc 2014, 101–105). Mimicking an authorized author's reasoning and literary style was, in fact, the aim of many late antique authors and makes it very difficult to distinguish between canon and fan fiction in the sense these terms are used in the fan fiction vocabulary.

[1.4] However, the concept of canon as it is used in fan fiction can also be found in biblical studies, from where it seems to have entered colloquial usage and, eventually, fan fiction jargon (Busse 2017, 101). In biblical studies this concept of canon has been criticized considerably lately for its anachronistic nature (Mroczec 2016). The critiques have foregrounded the problem that, by etically designating certain works as canonical in the sense of their being authoritative, binding, and original, other works are relegated to being merely pseudepigraphies or rewritten Bibles.

[1.5] Not surprisingly, then, the use of the same term *canon* as referring to authoritative, binding, and especially original imposes the same dichotomies and hierarchies between copyrighted stories and fan fiction. Thus, a similar "narrow view of a binary set of the 'good' (official and original) text and the 'bad' (amateurish and derivative) one" as found in biblical studies can be observed in fan fiction communities (Stasi 2006, 120). Yet, like the texts relating to or based upon an ancient text, fan fiction also entertains a very complex relationship to its copyrighted base text, a relationship that cannot be described merely in terms of hierarchy between texts.

[1.6] The modern concept of canon obviously generates biased assumptions regarding the relationship between texts as well as of their quality. In order to produce a fair and symmetric analysis of texts, a less biased term such as *base text* may be more helpful—if, indeed, a direct link between two texts can be established.

[1.7] Yet even if we abandon the concept of canon altogether, does fan fiction still have a lot to offer to scholars of ancient texts as a template of comparison? As I will discuss, fan fiction can also be produced without a distinct base text. Such fan fiction—and especially the reasons that lead to its creation—may serve as a helpful template for assessing the processes in what will be associated here heuristically with fan communities—namely, voluntary communities of joint interest—who produce artifacts and texts without a distinct base text. The remainder of this article will thus focus on fan fiction triggered by analogy and metaphor and fueled by curiosity, fascination, suspense, relevance to one's personal life, and entertainment. Transmedia storytelling will serve as a template to explore the mechanisms in play.

## **2. The concept of transmedia storytelling**

[2.1] The conscious and commercial application of mechanisms to trigger fandom as well as new media platforms for its display is called *transmedia storytelling*. Henry Jenkins describes the approach as follows: "Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience" (2007). The franchising of *The Matrix* (1999), for example, resulted in three films, several animated shorts, comic books, and video games. Fan fiction relating to The Matrix series can therefore not be traced back to a specific canon: "There is no one single source or *ur-text* where one can turn to gain all of the information needed to comprehend the *Matrix* universe" (Jenkins 2007). Therefore, it seems that the concept of transmedia storytelling may yield some answers to the question of how to access fannish text production and fan materiality without the need of an explicit base text.

[2.2] Books about transmedia storytelling offer advice on how to sell a story to the largest possible audience by involving and creating as many media platforms as possible. These platforms are tools that enable the fans to be in constant engagement with the plot throughout their everyday lives. Or, as Nuno Bernardo, the author of the *Producer's Guide to Transmedia*, puts it, "Transmedia storytelling involves creating content that engages the audience using various techniques to permeate their daily lives" (2011, 3). Transmedia storytelling aims to create a product suitable to generate an emotional and interactive fandom. In multimedia storytelling the fan, not the plot, is the main concern.

[2.3] There are different ways to achieve such an audience engagement. For Andrea Phillips, the author of *A Creator's Guide to Transmedia Storytelling* (2012), the most engaging story takes the form of a game, forcing the consumer to collect the content of the story across multiple platforms. This game engages the audience actively to press the plot ahead by means of puzzles, which have to be solved with the effort and the collective intelligence of fellow gamers. The gamers can influence and determine the plot via decision-choice possibilities. Borders to reality are crossed when players are called on their cell phones, when the characters reply by e-mail, or when clues are sent by postal mail. A multilayered story is fashioned that is, as the title of Phillips's book suggests, truly created by the author(s) for the consumers—who, despite their engagement, remain confined to the predetermined plot.

[2.4] Nuno Bernardo has a different approach to transmedia storytelling. He sees himself as the initiator of a story, not as its creator. After having initiated the story, he limits his role to being its producer. He proceeds by first identifying a potential group of consumers. This target group is subsequently teased through their favorite medium with text pieces out of context that seem to allude to a story. Knowing that fannish participation in terms of rewriting, advancing, and commenting on the plot cannot be avoided, Bernardo lets the fans do the rest. Since he found teenage girls to identify mostly with their peers, he created a character named Sophia, a teenage girl writing her diary.

[2.5] Sophia's daily entries could be read each night on a blog. Additionally, fans could also subscribe to receive messages from Sophia on their cell phones. These messages, which were apparently sent by Sophia to friends and relatives throughout her day, alluded to events happening to her in real time. On receiving these texts, the fans would rush to the chat room of the fan website and speculate about what had happened and about what was going to happen to Sophia. What remained to be done by Bernardo, as the producer, was to choose which idea to follow on what platform in order to meet fannish suggestion and demand. As Bernardo notes, "The cross-platform activity grows organically from inside the story. As the product grows, the cross-platform activities are not add-ons or gimmicks, instead, they are generated by the storyline itself" (2011, 5). "Sophia's Diary" ended as several books, a magazine, a TV series, and a blog. Still, the series did not render the content of the book, nor did the magazine: each medium provided new content (see also Jenkins 2007).

[2.6] Phillips's and Bernardo's approaches differ significantly in their consideration of fannish contribution to the story. While Phillips limits fannish impact to decision-choice making, Bernardo lets the fans write the plot. Although both models do not involve a canon, Bernardo's model is the most suitable for investigating fan activity without determining a base text because it really puts the fans and their activity into the center. Still, Phillips's model is useful as a reminder of the stimulating effect of dispersed content on different platforms, which seemingly creates a "hunt for content."

[2.7] There is, however, one important aspect that seemingly went unnoticed by Bernardo: the reason for the creativity that his character stimulated in the fans. Identification, I would argue, does not account for this outburst of innovation. Rather, Bernardo's teasers constantly forced the fans to draw analogies, by means of which they were able to imagine things outside the realm of their own experiences, even outside their previous parameters of thinking. The contextless pieces of information that the fans received throughout the day constantly forced them to ask, What does this remind me of? Analogy drawing and metaphorical thinking are essential factors in reaching solutions for problems and, consequently, innovation (Knorr-Cetina 1981, 49–67). It is mostly via analogy that humans can come up with new solutions and, hence, innovate.

[2.8] If transmedia storytelling is viewed as the result of a business plan and as the usage of contemporary technical possibilities for telling a captivating story, it is certainly right to claim that "we're beginning to see the emergence of new forms of storytelling inconceivable before the internet" (Rosenthal quoted in Bernardo 2011, xiii.). If, however, transmedia storytelling is conceived of as a self-developing story through fannish activity, there is reason to assume that this could happen everywhere and anytime. What is new is simply the merchandising of the respective mechanisms as a distinct concept. Such a snowball-effect story, as triggered by Bernardo, may as well take off without a cleverly designed story for a specific target group. An incident may coincidentally stimulate a conclusive analogy that wins an audience, which perpetuates the subject further. Indeed, the perfect fannish plot stimulates analogies to other characters and stories. The story can turn from a simple plot into a universe of plots embracing multiple plots and platforms of fan activity.

### **3. Two separate stories: Jesus and athletics**

[3.1] I would like to consider the story about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth in ancient Palestine as being, at the same time, the cause and effect of such a snowball story. Many factors contributed to the persistent importance of this narrative in Western history, and this is certainly not the place to deal with all of them. Rather, I will focus on one important factor responsible for the breakthrough of the story in late antiquity, turning it from a simple story among many similar stories into a story-universe. I will show how a powerful analogy enabled the association of many other plots and activities with the story about Jesus and fostered the participation of prior unseen masses of fans in the development of this new universe.

[3.2] In fact, the death and resurrection of Jesus—a central component of Paul's letters, the earliest textual witness in our possession—was nothing special in its time. Many of the ancient Greek heroes who died on the battlefields, sacrificing themselves for the greater good, were said to be still alive, appearing to and even sharing meals with the living (Betz 2004). Even the Gospel's attribution of wise teaching and miracles to Jesus was not something new; it was rivaled in its time by the lives of philosophers and heroes, as the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* by Philostratus shows. The fact that Jesus was a Judean hero may have made him popular among Romans with a certain affinity for Judean mythology (so-called God fearers) yet not particularly among the Judeans themselves and even less so among the decisive mass of the Roman population. No, the story of Jesus as promoted by Paul and portrayed in the Gospels did not have the potential to become what it became of its own accord.

[3.3] The story of Jesus coincided with a time in which different forms of athletics boomed. The elite Roman youth trained in gymnasia, and athletes traveled across the Roman Empire to compete in prestigious, sacred games. Winners "enjoyed a range of privileges and achieved a

high social status in their local communities" (Remijsen 2015, 30). The winner of an *eiselastic* game, for example, was not only entitled to a crown and a pension, but to a festive entrance into his hometown for which a part of the city wall was torn down. Privileges for victors included further "receiving privileges such as financial allowances and extra portions of sacrificial animals. They also walked as a separate group in festive parades in the city, as did other privileged groups" (Remijsen 2011, 99).

[3.4] Ancient athletics also consisted of games that bust the modern notion or categories of "sport" (König 2005, 32–35). Gladiatorial combats, the "most successful innovation in the repertory of Roman spectacular entertainment," quickly spread around the Mediterranean (Köhne 2000, 11; Weiss 2014). Their attraction was based not only on the tension of the game, but also on the involvement of the spectators, who could decide the final fate of the loser by respective cheering. For one moment, the circus turned social realities upside down and let everybody judge life and death (Ewigleben 2000). Beast hunts (*venationes*) and chariot racing were also popular forms of athleticism. Indeed, from the first through the end of the third century CE athletic games saw a renaissance. The Olympic games were held periodically in Italy, Greece, and Asia Minor. Local games also saw an exponential increase in the first two centuries CE, reaching their peak under the emperor Hadrian, 117–138 CE (Remijsen 2011; 2015). Epitaphs from the period demonstrate that such activities continued up to the sixth century.

[3.5] Athleticism was very popular at that time and was enjoyed by the masses, but it was an exertion of the elite. Indeed, only the wealthy could afford the training, and participation in the contests required a stable pedigree. Athletic competition was primarily a means for the elite to compete with each other publicly and to win both the prestige and the prizes for their family and city. Successful athletes could also accumulate multiple honorable citizenships (König 2005, 13). Successful slaves or sponsored talent were exceptions of the rule—local games were held by and for the elites (van Nijf 2001).

[3.6] Although agonistic festivals were not the only promising expositions for athletes, the patrons (*agonothete*) and other sponsors of agonistic festivals did receive honorable mentions with their contestants. Winners and their benefactors were openly celebrated, and some cities seem to have been plastered with epitaphs and statues of their local victors (van Nijf 2001). These expositions seem to have been very persistent, as attested by 150 *ostraca* (pottery sherds with writing) that were used as tokens for wine. These tokens, which were meant to be redeemed by specific athletes, date from the fourth century CE (Oxyrhynchus, Egypt), and they were all issued in the name of the same benefactor (Lougovaya 2018, 54–55).

[3.7] As Alan Cameron (1973) and Jason König (2005) remind us, although we now believe that many authors of the time were among the foremost leaders, the fame and influence of athletes actually may have far surpassed theirs. The reason for our misperception is that the statues of victorious athletes and their reputed sponsors have perished, and the lists of victors as well as their epitaphs have weathered and become illegible. By contrast, many texts of orators, physicians, and diverse philosophers have survived and been passed on, and they constitute the starting point of many disciplines of the contemporary academic curriculum. In spite of this, it should not be forgotten that texts and words, treatises and sermons take much longer to become entrenched in the public consciousness than a stadium victory celebrated by lavish processions and concise, uncomplicated notes of admiration posted everywhere. The fame of victorious athletes was much more immediate than that of the treatises and sermons condemning them.

[3.8] In their own rhetorical context, the denigrating remarks of the period's writers may seem reasonable and appropriate: the physician Galen, who claimed that athletics was not an art; Augustine, who condemned the games as worthless; and the orators, who claimed they fought verbally as hard if not more bravely than a gladiator. Yet most if not all of these claims must be seen in light of the competition over patronage. A city had only a limited number of wealthy citizens; if they chose to sponsor the games, the funds to promote a physician and his theories, a bishop and his church, or an orator and his school would become scarce (Lehoux 2012, 4–8; König 2005, 2–7; Brown 1981, 23–39).

[3.9] So it seems those who wanted to promote themselves or their story had to engage, one way or another, with athletics—yet the Gospels do not. In fact, they seem to avoid using the term *hero* or any athletic terminology that could have associated Jesus with Greek myths and the Olympic games (Betz 2004). Instead, the Gospels distinctly link Jesus to Judean myths and the predictions of Judean prophets. So why was it that by the time the pilgrim Egeria visited Jerusalem in the late fourth century, she witnessed processions and displays of Jesus's relics on his commemoration days that followed the customs for heroes? Why was it that she witnessed similar veneration at the shrines of martyrs in many other locales as well? As I will argue in the next section, the transformation of Jesus into a form of local hero was due to an analogy with athletes.

#### **4. The power of analogy: Jesus, the martyrs, and athletics**

[4.1] Although in two instances Paul makes use of athletic vocabulary in his letters, he never uses it with regard to Jesus. Rather, he evokes the behavior of the athlete, familiar to everybody, as being exemplary for self-discipline and endurance—while at the same time both vain and transitory.

[4.2] Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games restricts himself beforehand. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. (1 Corinthians 9:24–26 NIV, slightly adapted)

[4.3] Paul draws an analogy here from the athlete to the follower of Christ. Without making a distinction between rich and poor, with or without pedigree, the followers of Christ have a chance to compete and to win a prize. This is, however, a marginal figure of speech, and we should not overrate it. A more pointedly formulated invitation to imitate an athlete is found in the (pseudo) Pauline letter 1 Timothy 6:12 (NIV, slightly adapted):

[4.4] Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you have been called and for which you confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses [*martyrōn*].

[4.5] This is certainly more of a catchphrase, and it may have circulated independently before and after it was used in this letter. Still, it does not account for the fact that Jesus came to be associated with athletic heroes. Rather, it seems that we must follow a different path of analogy, but one these passages may have been indicating.

[4.6] Indeed, another set of narratives became very popular in late antiquity and contributed locally to the fortification of bishops: the cult of the martyrs or, as it is also called, the cult of

the saints. Similar to the Jesus story, scholars have struggled to explain how the stories of various killed Christians became as popular and influential as they did.

[4.7] Throughout history people have died heroic deaths, sacrificing their lives in war or to appease the gods (Moss 2013; Boyarin 1999). Funeral orations also were part of the Greek and Roman traditions, and with them the attempt to make sense of a person's death (see, for example, Dio Chrysostom's oration for the boxer Melankomas). Even the anticipation of "posthumous recognition" is not unheard of (Boyarin, 95). Thus, graphic depictions of cruel deaths were available at the time, but they did not stir the same passion as the martyr stories (Moss). What was different about the Christians who died in the arena as witnesses (martyrs in Greek) for their faith was that they became associated with athletes.

[4.8] From the third century onward the martyrs were called *athletes of Christi* or *athletes of faith* (Heid 2007; Kitzler 2015). Obviously, an analogy had been drawn between the martyr who won the eternal crown by dying in the arena and the athlete who won the game. This analogy enabled the invention of a completely new hero—the man or woman who died victoriously for God in the arena. This was a new character, who united the qualities of a mythological hero with the fame and prestige of a contemporary athlete.

[4.9] A hero was said to "stand between the gods and human beings. They know less than the gods, but more than human beings...Toward human beings these heroes appear helpful and kind, but if they are insulted and neglected by a lack of faith, their anger must be reckoned with" (Betz 2004, 36–37). Heroes not only knew remedies against physical pain and to assist love affairs, but they were active beyond their deaths. The same was true for the saints, as the accounts of their miracles and lives show. However, compared with the athlete-hero, the saint became more prestigious—especially as the analogy with athletes brought patronage by the wealthy.

[4.10] Just like with real athletes, the athletes of Christ affected the decoration of cities. Emperor Constantine (third to fourth centuries), for example, made use of the athletes of Christ in several ways, but particularly to distinguish himself from his predecessor Maximus. Maximus was considered responsible for the tragic deaths of Christians in the arena, and Constantine held himself out as different. He renovated and enhanced the Circus Maximus, and he established "halls of victory for the martyrs" on the Via Appia that led to and from the circus. Attending the games in the circus thereby became a commemoration of the victory of the martyrs (Heid 2007, 417).

[4.11] Constantine's new direction was, of course, no different than what the cities did for their athletes; statues of the athletes were "set up along the public roads of the city" (van Nijf 2001, 325). Starting with Rome, Christian martyrs became the new poster children for cities, standing for bravery and victory. In the same vein, martyr basilicas were built in the shape of the circus (see Heid 2007, 419–21 for illustrations). The newly established festive calendar under Constantine encouraged a similar back and forth between the commemoration of the athletes of Christ and agonistic games: in this calendar, the commemoration days for the martyrs alternated with 177 days for games.

[4.12] These new athletes forced other cities to acquire one or several martyrs for themselves, which they then could promote for the glory of the city with shrines dedicated to these saints at the sites of their death. And the story that started as a mere image—a Christian dying for his faith in the arena—was capable of generating multiple analogies. As the elites of the cities thought about what this picture reminded them of, they could create individual plots. Saint



Sergius, for example, became the saint of a frontier region and was always depicted as an armed rider, a "soldier-saint" (Fowden 1999). Local patrons made sure that they had their say in the fashioning of the saint (Brown 1981, 50–68).

[4.13] Bishops were very interested in having a popular shrine in their diocese because this supported an increase in authority both locally and with regard to other bishops. One of Augustine's sermons (fourth/fifth century), for example, tells the story of a brother and sister, Paul and Palladia, who had been cursed by their mother. Although the siblings wandered from one martyr shrine to another in hopes of healing, it was only at the martyr shrine of Stephen in Ancona (Italy) that Paul had a vision. He was told that three months later he would be cured in Hippo—Augustine's own diocese. Augustine reported that the healing had indeed occurred—and that just one moment after the healing of the brother, even as Augustine was delivering the Easter sermon, Palladia was healed as well. This was quite a persuasive promotion for the shrine in Hippo (Morehouse 2016). Simultaneously, this example shows to what extent the association of a new plot was enabled by this "athletes of Christ" metaphor. These associations, in turn, generated a set of loosely connected story lines that were unrestricted by a base text.

[4.14] The place of Jesus in all this is not quite clear. As the itineraries of the Pilgrim of Bordeaux and the female pilgrim Egeria (both fourth century) attest, their affections do not seem to have distinguished much between the shrines of Jesus in Jerusalem and the shrines of saints. To many, it seems, Jesus was just one saint among many. Indeed, the church fathers struggled in several respects with the overwhelming success of this developing story universe for, along with the athletes, they also had acquired the fans: some passionate, some fanatic, and some tagalongs who could be bent in either direction.

[4.15] Indeed, the descriptions of late antique fans of athletics do not differ much from those of our own time. The fourth century orator Libanius, for example, complained that his students would rather talk about charioteers, mimes, and battles than listen to him (Lib. Or. 3.12). Gregory of Nazianzus and Basil of Caesarea (both fourth century CE) reported how fans of chariot racing would not even let go of their passion in their sleep (Puk 2014, 206). Violent passion was expressed in the many curse tablets that have been found buried in the field of the circus (Gager 1990). Regularly, games or actors (mimes) had to be banned temporarily from cities because their fans caused riots (Cameron 1973). For example,

[4.16] In November 561 CE the fans gathered at the chariot races in the hippodrome of Constantinople created a serious disturbance. The fans of the Green racing team attacked the fans of the Blue team. When the emperor Justinian heard about the riot, he ordered the commander of his guards to separate the two sides. The guards, however, proved unable to stop or even slow the fight, and it continued with the Blue fans invading the seats of the Green fans, chanting "Burn here, burn there! Not a Green anywhere." In response, the Greens spilled out of the hippodrome and proceeded to riot in the streets, stoning the people they encountered, stealing property, and chanting "Set alight, set alight! Not a Blue in sight." The riot lasted all night and into the next morning. (Parnell 2014, 633, referring to Theophanes' *Chronographia* 235.6).

[4.17] It does not come as much of a surprise that the bishops had to struggle with their communities for what they considered to be the right attitude toward the athletes of Christ, especially when it came to the commemorating festivals. Many wanted to celebrate the victorious saints the same way they celebrated regular athletes, with a lot of wine, excess, an imitation of the martyr's fight, or just by fighting in his or her honor (Brown 2000; Heid

2007). Against this "mere celebration" of the martyr, the church fathers—and foremost Augustine—held that mimesis, the imitation of the saint, should be the attitude of the believer toward the saint. And imitation of the saint was then increasingly associated not with death but with an ascetic lifestyle (Cobb 2017, 112–13).

## 5. Creating new platforms

[5.1] We have seen so far how by analogy the martyrs came to be associated with victorious athletes and how this spurred the creation of stories about these martyrs, their fights, and their lives. Because these martyrs became associated with athletes, every prestigious city had to have a victorious martyr. Thus, local martyr legends and shrines were established. These sites can be seen as platforms of content as they are used in multimedia storytelling. Each one provided a story about a saint, usually their life, death, and miracles. To visit different sites would provide the pilgrim with new content, which was related to the content of other stories about martyrs while remaining sufficient unto itself.

[5.2] Most people only visited their local shrines. Those who had the means and the willingness visited more remote ones. Indeed, there is much that connects the passion of these early pilgrims for the saints to contemporary fans who travel to locations of importance to their favorite media's plot or character—a form of practical exegesis (Larsen 2019). Pilgrims met en route or on site (Bangert 2010); as the pilgrim Egeria writes in her itinerary, she even met someone twice during her journey (Gingras 1970). We may therefore reckon that a great deal of exchange occurred among the pilgrims, especially with regard to their knowledge about the saints and the shrines. A longer pilgrimage was an occasion to learn about the customs at shrines in other dioceses and to compare and to exchange stories (Morehouse 2016). This temporary community of shared interest, bringing together people from different social and cultural backgrounds, was in many ways similar to the internet communities of today, except for the fact that pilgrims were not completely anonymous.

[5.3] Pilgrims also directed their collective intelligence to learn more about their favorite athlete of Christ or to complete their pictures of the athletes of Christ. The growth of the accounts of the lives and acts of the different saints parallels the increasingly shared lexicon and story plot (Fowden 1999; Morehouse 2016). The fans shaped their stories and enlarged them: every trip to a nearby or far off shrine and every encounter with another pilgrim would provide new information about their favorite character or another subplot of the story. It was a sort of a "hunt for plot," as described in Phillips's model of transmedia storytelling.

[5.4] In fact, it seems that the only binding aspect in the creation of a martyr was his or her cruel death. Indeed, a cruel death, graphically depicted, became a sign of the truthfulness of a martyr story (Brown 2000). Instead of a canon, we find a binding motif. With regard to the saints' lives before their deaths and their appearances and acts afterward, the characters were very open. Thus, it is not surprising that the different treatises called "Acts of," "Life of," or "Miracles of" Saint X, Y, or Z increasingly aligned because people do not tend to come up with farfetched analogies once the story has taken off. These processes of character alignment have been observed by Brett Jenkins in contemporary fan fiction as well: "There is a sense that open-ended characters can be 'colonized' or 'homogenized' by the fanfic writer, even those characters which can be said to defy colonization as in some postmodern fictions. ... After an initial proliferation of possibilities, comes a kind of homogenization of character and a delimitation of possibilities, contradicting the openness desired by fan fiction writers" (2015, 371). Thus, as Jenkins concludes, from a narratological perspective fans love their characters to meaninglessness.

[5.5] However, the pilgrims, just like fans today, did not mind. The pilgrim Melania the Younger (early fifth century) is said to have prepared herself for her pilgrimage to Egypt by going "through the Lives of the fathers as if she were eating dessert" (Gerontius, *The Life of Melania the Younger*, quoted in Frank 1998, 484). When pilgrims read these stories together, they felt the presence of the saint like a sweet fragrance (Brown 1981, 78–79). Egeria read the *Acts of Thecla* together with other pilgrims (Egeria's itinerary 23.5–6) and noted that the reading moved her to give thanks. "She notes that 'I gave infinite thanks to Christ our God who deemed me worthy to fulfill my desires in all respects'" (quoted in Davis 2001, 145n113). However, even this incident was not singular, a fact that stresses the repetitive nature of the pilgrimage and its experiences. Stephen Davis observed that Egeria's "reading of the ATh [Acts of Thecla] at Seleucia parallels her reading of Scripture during her stops at pilgrim sites in the Holy Land" (2001, 145n113). It may seem from these examples that pilgrimage and veneration of the saints were very much a female activity. Similarly, many fans of athletes and games were women (Ewigeleben 2000; Miller 2004; McCullough 2008). Although men were often the authors of these stories, they sometimes assumed female authorship (Burrus 2017).

[5.6] New stories emerged as pilgrims had dreams and visions, or simply confused one saint with another, or drew analogies to other stories about saints. Every now and then, someone would be tasked with collecting the miracles that happened at the local shrine in order to consolidate the tradition and legitimize it (Fowden 1999). Some stories seem to be veritable advertisements for the products sold there, as we see in miracle 42 in the *Miracles of Thecla* (Dagron 1978), which tells the story of the woman Kallista, who had a husband who betrayed her. Another woman had given Kallista a drink that made her so ugly that her husband cast her out of the house, whereupon he took up with the other woman. Kallista, in her despair went to see Thecla, who gave her the following advice:

[5.7] "Go and take of the soap that they sell in front of my temple and wash your face with it!" Kallista did this—and came out even more beautiful than before!

[5.8] It seems, however, that it was not an easy task to turn mostly oral fan fiction into writing. The clergyman from Seleucia, for example, who collected and composed the *Miracles of Thecla* in the fifth century, admitted that he added some of the discourses (Dagron 1978). It further seems that the composers usually furnished these stories with literary motifs common to popular Hellenistic novels as well (Barrier 2009). Moreover, it appears that composers found it difficult to impose a chronological order on the material. Consequently, historical facts are never an issue in these fan stories. Names of Caesars or Augusts are usually only general, and the names of places other than the shrine that is the focus of the account are usually omitted (Fowden 1999).

[5.9] As the models discussed for transmedia storytelling show, fandom can be exploited profitably, and so we also find in late antiquity that smart businessmen and women quickly understood how to make money from people's affection and passion for the saints. Indeed, we find even a sort of a franchising going on as craftsmen incorporated the motifs of the saint on their products. Shrines sold different products to the pilgrims, much like the fan articles that were sold next to the Roman circus (figures 1 and 2). Flasks, probably containing oil or dust, did not come bare but rather carried a picture of the saint. Less related to the shrine and more to the daily life of the pilgrim were the combs similarly decorated with saints and their symbols (figure 3). Thus, the she-bear and the lioness—which instead of eating Thecla in the arena protected her—are always depicted together with the saint (figure 4). Many other, less

durable objects, such as the soaps mentioned in the accounts, may not have survived the ravages of time.



Figure 1. Oil lamp depicting gladiator, first century CE (Rome).



Figure 2. Oil lamp depicting a gladiator of the *mirmillo*-type beating a *thraex* gladiator, second century CE.



Figure 3. Pilgrim's flask depicting St. Menas with the two camels who knew where his martyred body should be buried, sixth–seventh century CE (Alexandria/Egypt).



Figure 4. St. Thecla with the she-bear and the lioness that spared her life in the arena, sixth century CE (unknown origin; verso depicting St. Menas).

[5.10] Some of the artifacts depicting athletes of Christ can be related to a continuous history of a local type of iconography that had served other decorative purposes before being used on shrine souvenirs. An example of a combination of local art and a saint is found with North African red slip pottery. The workshops there had specialized for centuries in the application of wild animal designs. With the rise of the Roman circus, these techniques were used to show scenes of wild beasts attacking men. After the athletes of Christ had begun to compete for fame with the real athletes, the available motifs were enhanced with martyr scenes—specifically scenes involving wild beasts, with lions the most favored. The ancient craft adapted easily to the new demand. With the rising interest in female martyrs, the workshops expanded to add female figurines to their set stock. One motif represents, for example, a woman among lions with the caption: "Domina Victoria" (Victorious Lady). This somewhat nonspecific inscription, which could apply to any heroine, made the plate appealing to a wider clientele because it could be applied to the martyr of one's choice, be it Victoria, Perpetua, or Thecla (van den Hoek and Herrmann 2013).

[5.11] Indeed, the shrines were lucrative sites and were protected by the state (Fowden 1999). The expectations of pilgrims were met not only in the form of souvenirs but also by means of architecture. In Abû Mînâ, for example, located approximately 45 km southwest of Alexandria in Egypt, the pilgrim's anticipation was consciously built up by a path that became gradually narrower as they approached the shrine (Grossmann 1998). Pilgrimage took place amid a mix of consciously steered passion by businesses, by a choice of different platforms, and by the space for the development of the self as well as one's favorite characters—exactly what multimedia storytelling aims for. Pilgrimage even seems to have surpassed

contemporary media platforms because the borders to reality were not merely punctually crossed; pilgrimage provided a complete physical immersion in content.

[5.12] In many ways the development of the "cult of the saints" is similar to media convergence as described by Henry Jenkins (2006, 3): "I will argue here against the idea that convergence should be understood primarily as a technological process bringing together multiple media functions within the same devices. Instead, convergence represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content." In that the saints came to unite both the veneration formerly accorded to heroes and the popularity and frenzy caused by athletes, they also occupied more and more diverse platforms than any other celebrity before. Moreover, even though each saint had his or her own story, they could be linked: they died for the same purpose. They were all equal winners, and the fan did not have to choose between them. That it was not an exclusive fandom enabled the pilgrim trails. It was a cultural shift that had started with a metaphor.

## 6. Conclusion

[6.1] I have attempted to show how concepts of transmedia storytelling can be used as templates for the assessment of fan activity and fan fiction in late antiquity. The problem of focusing too narrowly on fan fiction as based on a distinct canon may pose problems because it is often impossible to designate a base text. Transmedia storytelling, on the other hand, can be conceptualized as a story evolving on its own by enabling a certain public to become innovative when forced to draw analogies to other stories. When the audience is only teased with contextless bits of what is apparently a whole story, they are constantly forced to furnish context, asking themselves what this particular bit reminds them of.

[6.2] This process also ultimately involves the association of the story or subplots with new platforms through which new and self-contingent content can be presented. This range of platforms may engage fans in a sort of a hunt for content. My claim is therefore that while producers of transmedia stories create these platforms consciously and plan the game to a certain extent in advance, this process may also happen naturally. Even in this case, monetarily exploitation and power will be involved because to control a story means to control the fans.

[6.3] As a case example I showed, very concisely, how by analogy the Christians dying in the arena came to be called the "athletes of Christ." This analogy enabled the characters of the martyrs to expand and to incorporate the *ur*-athlete, the hero, as well as the contemporary athlete. This enabled the mixture of veneration, as it was formerly accorded to the wonder-working hero, and frenzy of the fans in the stadium. These were strong markers of the saint cult developing in late antiquity.

[6.4] Because athletes were the poster children of cities, the association of martyrs with athletes generated the need for local martyrs. As with the athletes, the martyrs—that is, their shrines and stories—were patronized by local elites. These sites, I argue, functioned like media platforms in multimedia storytelling, providing new content of the saint story while being in itself contingent. By traveling from one site to another, fans could add new subplots to their saint-stories universe as well as have a firsthand experience of the site where the saint was still active. As anticipated by multimedia storytellers, late antique pilgrimages provided a full and even physical immersion in content.



[6.5] Transmedia storytelling was used here to explain a chronologically ruffled example of a story universe triggered by a simple image, real or imagined: the Christian in the arena and its analogy to athletes. The template of transmedia storytelling or even convergence culture will prove even more useful in more detailed micro-analyses of the analogies that enabled innovative turns in stories and/or led to new platforms for content display. These platforms may be much less obvious than shrines or texts, and they may comprise pictures in public houses, statues, and even coins.

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